

DIME NOVEL ROUND-UP

A monthly magazine devoted to the collecting, preservation and literature of the old-time dime and nickel novels, libraries and popular story papers.

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The Anatomy of Dime Novels

#12 Novels of the Circus

By J. Edward Leithead



DIME NOVEL SKETCHES NO. 105

DIAMOND DICK LIBRARY

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The Anatomy of Dime Novels

#12 Novels of the Circus

By J. Edward Leithead

To paraphrase a famous literary line, "a circus buff in his time sees many shows." It is only the casual circus-goer who says, "see one circus and you've seen them all." Perhaps it was this minority opinion that partly influenced John Ringling North in bringing a touch of the Broadway musical to the circus, but, more likely, it was the famous super-showmanship of the North brothers, John and Henry. And certainly the glittering pageantry of these productions was eye-filling and exciting entertainment, with a rousing theme song to start it off. "San Francisco '49," the special feature of the 1940 edition of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey, The Greatest Show on Earth, was a stellar example. There was a bit of grumbling, here and there, that established circus acts were being cut to make way for the innovations. But I, who saw most if not all of these shows, thought they were well balanced.

"The Aerial Ballet" was a new style spectacle of grace, beauty and color, and another, though I cannot recall the title of the display, was performed under a full spread of the Ringling "Big Top," with three rings and two stages: it started with a parade of horses (ring stock), each led by a clown (all in the "neat" whiteface clown make-up) and with a ballerina perched sidewise on each broad equine back. As the horses passed the rings and stages, ballerinas dropped lithely to earth and formed up for the ensuing dance routine. It was toe-dancing supreme with the famous Ringling band, directed by Merle Evans, playing muted ballet

music.

It could have been labeled "The Act Beautiful," but this title was reserved for Madame Ella Bradna (the wife of Fred Bradna, equestrian director of Barnum & Bailey and later Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey), who, in her earlier days was a marvelous equestrienne and later the star of displays featuring fine horses, an aviary and prize dogs, among which was the giant Alaskan huskie named "Zero."

After all, the circus was accustomed to staging spectacles or "specs," usually first on the program. Barnum & Bailey, before combining with Ringling Bros., staged a super-spec, "The Wizard Prince of Arabia"—one of many in "The Greatest Show on Earth." The Hagenbeck-Wallace Circus put on a memorable spec called "Persia," and in the 1930's, the Clyde Beatty-Cole Bros. Circus featured "The Serenade of Spain." But none of these topped the magnificence of John and Henry Ringling North's extravaganzas in the tanbark arena. Much of the costume designing was the work of the famous Norman Bel Geddes. Since the ownership of the Greatest Show on Earth has changed recently, it will seem strange to view it with the thought that for the first time "The Big One" is not under the direction of a member of the Ringling family.

I think most circus buffs agree that under canvas is the most enjoyable and natural setting to see a circus performance. Circuses and Wild West shows have ever been outdoor entertainment. And yet, having to adjust to the march of time and chang-

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ing conditions, I think we would all rather attend the circus under roof than have no circus at all. The street parade went first, never to return, and you are lucky if you ever heard the steam piano (calliope) roaring out a spirited circus tune as it rumbled along at the end of the parade. The last time I heard one was during a walk-around at a Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey matinee in the 1950's.

The fascination of the circus grips you the moment you step on the lot. There's no smell like the smell of tanbark, no sight like that of the Big Top, its side walls billowing gently in the spring or summer wind, flags fluttering from the massive center poles, crowds at the main entrance, which leads from the menagerie to the main tent, crowds along the Midway with its huge canvas paintings of wonders to be seen within the sideshow, the voice of the spieler inviting you to step inside and be amazed: "A full hour till the big show starts, folks, time to see everything! Hurry, hurry, hurry! How many, mister?"

Sure, go in and see The Tallest Man, The Sword Swallower, The Man Who Writes With His Feet, The Dog-faced Boy, The Bearded Lady, The Living Skeleton and the rest of the unusual humans; it will sharpen your anticipation of what awaits you in the main tent — an aggregation of skillful and daring men and women in spine-tingling equestrian acts, death-defying aerial feats, dangerous cat acts, elephants in three rings at once and elephants tramping the hipodrome track, to rise ponderously in the long mount and sprinkle you with sawdust if you're in the front row, and the clowns, an army of them, and acrobats, balancing, tumbling, jumping . . .

If, coming out of the sideshow, you still have the time and can pick your way over the guy-ropes and electric cables to the circus backyard, you will be rewarded by sights seen nowhere else: the dining tent (kitchen), the pad room (tent for horse furniture), huge red-and-gold wagons, display floats, wheeled cages containing the cats that will go through

their routines in the big steel cage (not without some snarling disputes with the trainer over that baffling kitchen chair), stacks of baled hay: circus folk walking or sitting around the lot, most in make-up as time for the afternoon performance draws near, clowns very busy in Clown Alley, putting last touches to special costumes; canvasmen and roustabouts perched on wagon-tongues, smoking, talking or sleeping on straw under wagons, glad if this is a week-long stand (always two weeks and sometimes longer in the old days) and they don't have to tear down or raise all those acres of canvas for a few days.

Think of all the circus acts you have witnessed in your life; it would form an imposing array of star performers. Take first the circus equestrians, who seem to run to large family groups: the Reiffenachs (long with Ringling Bros.), the Cristianis (Lucio's marvelous somersaulting, using three horses), the Loyal-Repenskis ("sensational troupe of bareback riding marvels"—from a Ringling poster), the Hannefords (Poodles, the acrobatic king of comedy on a "rosinback"), the Franconis (with Clyde Beatty-Cole Bros. several seasons, as skillful and handsome a group of bareback riders, men and girls, as ever I saw). But there have also been many single star equestriennes, like May Wirth (from Australia, who wore a bow of ribbon in her hair) and Dorothy Herbert (who took high hurdles and threw herself backward in the saddle with a knee around the horn).

Back in the days when the Adam Forepaugh Circus and Barnum & Bailey were rivals in the increasing size and importance of circuses, Forepaugh had a star equestrienne, advertised as "Miss Aimee Parnella, Graceful Riding, and Wonderful Juggling and Balancing on the Running Globe." A poster shows Aimee Parnella taking a hurdle with her horse on foot, one arm around its neck. But even harder was the trick of keeping herself balanced on the globe as it rolled down an inclined plank, and, at the same time, juggling six dissimilar objects—two knives, two bottles and two billiard balls. Circus performers have

ever been noted for ability to do the seemingly impossible.

Fine horses being one of the chief features of any circus, it was once the usual thing to close the show with a Roman chariot race around the hippodrome track—quite exciting, too—but in these latter days it has been replaced by another kind of display, generally a pageant involving the elephants.

The cat acts were always favorites with me and there have been many celebrated wild animal trainers. Frank Bostock will be remembered by the real old-time circus buffs—he had a big group of lions and would sit in their midst “reading” a paper; and Captain Jack Bonavita was a contemporary of Bostock, who put a mixed group of eighteen lions and tigers through their paces in his act. Mabel Stark was one of the few lady trainers, who sustained serious injuries more than once (as have most—or shall I say all—who follow this dangerous profession). Her specialty was tigers, in fact, she was sometimes called “The Tiger Woman,” but I seem to remember her also in the big cage with leopards. She was with Ringling Bros. and the Al G. Barnes Circus and others, the last named advertising itself as a “Wild Animal Circus,” which meant, for one thing, it specialized in cat acts and the like. Captain Terrell Jacobs and his wife, Dolly, when featured with Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey put on separate cat acts, and one was really high tension, a tiger, mounted on a horse, the latter protected from fang and claw by a steel collar equipped with long spikes; and the tiger, while his mount circled the ring within the steel cage, jumped through fiery hoops. Alfred Court, who was very successful with the mixed wild animal groups—lions and tigers with bears and Great Danes—and Roman Proske, who was attacked and dragged about the big cage by one of his tigers, yet lived to make a come-back, were famous European wild animal trainers who were as well-known in America as abroad.

It is possible that the late Clyde Beatty appeared in the steel cage

with a greater number of jungle actors, lions and tigers together, than anyone else. There were forty animals on pedestals of varying height when Beatty stepped nimbly to center of cage with whip, kitchen chair, blank-loaded gun—and a reserve gun on his hip—during his first engagement with “The Big One” in Madison Square Garden. I recall a story current at the time, that John Ringling, last of the world-famous brothers, told Clyde Beatty he had so many cats that the audience couldn’t see the trainer. Well, Beatty was five-feet-six, but in that white costume and moving swiftly and gracefully, he always dominated the assemblage of jungle killers. For over forty years he stood off destruction by fang and claw in the big cage, center ring. And in his later years, when he had his own show, the Clyde Beatty Circus, of which he was the star with his trained lions and tigers, and then combined with Cole Bros. Circus, still the topline, I saw his show as often as it arrived in Philadelphia. And Beatty never abandoned tents for indoor performances.

On a memorable sunny afternoon in May, 1957, when Clyde Beatty-Cole Bros., The Greatest Circus on Earth was making a 10-day stand under canvas at Lighthouse Field, Front St. and Erie Avenue, I met and talked to Clyde Beatty in the circus backyard, twenty minutes before show time. I looked over his fine group of 12 black-maned Numidian lions and 4 Royal Bengal tigers, that would presently be turned loose in the big cage. Beatty was in white shirt and trousers, his usual costume in the ring. We had a very pleasant chat about his work with the big cats and the circus in general, and shook hands at parting. Told him I wished I had brought along my copies of his “The Big Cage” and “Jungle Performers” to be autographed.

Even though a sketchy reminiscence of such a large subject as the circus, I cannot refrain from taking another paragraph to mention other favorites. The Wallendas, those absolute marvels of the high wire, and the Alzanas, another high wire act scarcely less

hazardous. This calls to mind Con Colleano of the tight wire, who, in the ring, wore the costume of a toreador. He perfected the forward somersault. I saw him with Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey and the Clyde Beaty-Cole Bros. Circus. He didn't always do it the first try, for it was far more difficult—and risky—than the usual backward somersault. Hubert Castle, with his rubber-legged drunk act, was still another wire walker of wonderful skill and balance. When it comes to flyers (trapeze artists), none was more famous than Alfredo Codona, who performed the triple-somersault, that all but impossible spin in the air at high speed. Once you saw Codona do it you could never forget, and I saw him more than once. And many, many times I saw that tiny, dainty "Queen of the Air" on the Roman rings, Lillian Leitzel, the star upon whom the spotlight centered in center ring and for whom the band stopped playing briefly; and at the highest point of the main tent she would begin those body half-turns over one arm to an accompanying drumroll. She became Mrs. Alfredo Codona at the height of her fame and his . . .

It isn't hard to imagine that anything as spectacular as the circus could not fail to be popular as story material for dime novels, which relied mainly on the chill, thrill and color formula for their appeal. It may surprise you to learn how many nickel libraries and weeklies published tales of circus life, and I must get on with it.

Beadle & Adams, of course, published some of the first dime novels of the circus, the earliest dating back to the days of wagon shows, before circuses became too big to be transported on anything less than their own special railroad cars. In Beadle's Dime Library, #236 was *Champion Sam*, or, *The Monarch of the Show*. A *Romance of the Circus and Prize-Rings*, by Thomas Hoyer Monstery (Frederick Whittaker), #406, *Old Pop Hicks, Showman*, or, *Lion Charley's Luck*. A *Tale of Circus Rivalry*, by Frederick Whittaker, #462, *The Circus Detective*, or, *Griplock in a*

New Role, by Jackson Knox, #538, *Rube Rocket*, the *Tent Detective*, or, *The Treacherous Two*. A *Romance of the Rings*, by Geo. C. Jenks, #770, *The Showman Detective*, or, *Old Grip's Compact*, by Jackson Knox, #929, *Gentleman George*, the *Showman-Sport*, or *Spotter Spangles' Scoop*, by Howard Holmes ("spotter" was another name for sleuth). It would seem that, with the exception of #236 and 406 by Captain Whittaker, all the others are detective yarns with a circus background, and that is true, but the circus atmosphere is so all-pervading they can be classed as circus items.

Beadle's Half Dime Library contributed the following: #36, *The boy Clown*, or, *The Queen of the Arena*. A *Romance of the Ring*, by F. S. Finn (note "Ring" in the singular—this was in the days of the one-ring circus, before a three-ring show was attempted, and in that era of one ringmaster there was the talking clown who swapped jokes with the man in the top hat and red coat), #458, *New England Nick*, or, *The Fortunes of a Foundling*, by Albert W. Aiken (reprinted in *Brave and Bold* #143), #464, *Nimble Nick*, the *Circus Prince*, or, *The Fortunes of a Bareback Rider*, by Albert W. Aiken (reprinted in *Brave and Bold* #132, and the fact Aiken wrote both and a certain similarity in titles, makes me wonder if they are the same story—I have no copy of "New England Nick" to check with), #552, *Ariel*, the *Athlete*, or, *The Ring Detective's Transformation*. A *Tale of Wild Life Under Canvas in the Far West*, by David Druid, #640, *Bareback Beth*, the *Centaur of the Circle*, by J. C. Cowdrick, #872. *Two Showmen Detectives in Colorado*, or, *Pete Parmelee, the Vagabond Tramp*, by A. K. Sims, #900, *Jumping Jack's Jubilee*, or, *The Circus Queen's Shadow*. A *Romance of the Sawdust Circle*, by J. C. Cowdrick, #952, *The Circus Detective*, or, *Bareback Billy's Round-Up*, by Harold Payne.

Beadle & Adams apparently were preoccupied with the detective angle, as if a story of circus life couldn't stand alone. Another black-and-white

publication, Young Sports Library, had an issue about Eugene Sandow, the Strong Man, and another about a fictitious circus acrobat, "P. T. Barnum, Jr." Frank Leslie's Boys and Girls Weekly published what appear to be 5 straight circus life serials: #223 to 236, Life in the Circus, or, Brothers of the Ring, #557 to 568 The Iron Eel, or, Joe Stollabird and the Circus, #610 to 623, Joga, the Juggler, or, The Joys and Dangers of a Showman's Life, #698 to 713, Tightrope Tom, or, The Showman's Ward, #789 to 799, The Boy Beast Tamer, or, Tommy Bean's Travels With the Circus.

I hope the various and sometimes rather long listings do not become boring. They are intended as a possible aid to collectors who wish to gather novels of certain classifications and who may not know in what publications they appeared or just how many there were. It takes considerable time to look them up, and, at that, I don't doubt I miss a few.

Frank Tousey, who definitely favored circus stories in his publications, ran at least seven such serials in Boys of New York, and since most were reprinted in Pluck and Luck I shall list them under the heading of that very popular weekly. The Boys of New York Pocket Library also ran circus stories which were not reprinted in Pluck and Luck: #51, Nan and Nat, the Child Riders. A True Tale of the Arena, #106, Bareback Tom, the Circus Wonder, #173, Jack Bruce, the Star of the Circus, #197, The Broken Vow, or, The Lion Tamer's Oath, #214, The Circus Runaway, or, The Boy Trainer and His Elephant on Their Travels, #222, The Circus Wonder.

(to be continued)

WANTED

Golden Days Vols. 1 through 7, 9, 16 and 17. Single copies in long runs are also acceptable. Also interested in other boys' papers such as Chatterbox, St. Nicholas, Good News, Golden Argosy, old issues of Saturday Evening Post and other adult papers from 1870 to 1900. State price and condition. Algers also wanted.

ARTHUR N. CARTER

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- 288. Aimee B. MacEwen, Victorian House, Stockton Springs, Me. 04981 (New)
- 97. Charles Rothstein, 1055 8th St. South, Naples, Florida (New address)
- 289. Ned Hall, 16 Old Road West, Gravesend, Kent, England (New member)
- 290. Mrs. Madelyn W. Stenberg, 12 Florence St., Attleboro, Mass. 02703 (New)
- 197. Dr. David J. Thompson, 7205 Langley Canyon Road, Salinas, Calif. 93901 (New address)

HISTORY OF THE HAPPY HOURS BROTHERHOOD and THE DIME NOVEL ROUND-UP

By Ralph F. (Reckless Ralph) Cummings

PART II

Way back in 1925 when Tom Kelley used to publish little papers for me, such as The Novel Hunter, The Novel Hunter's Year Book, which started in 1926 and ended in 1931, I was in my seventh heaven knowing I had become a publisher.

Tom printed everything by hand in those days, set the type and what not. I used to have anywhere from 200 to 500 printed at a time. I would get them flat and I assembled them, got them into envelopes and off to the post office. I was in my prime in those days. Now that I am 70 years old I'm not so fast as I used to be.

Even further back in time, December 1922, Bob Smeltzer published my first paper. This was the Cummings and Clarks Flyer, printed only on one side and about 7x8 inches. Nos. 2, 3 and 4 were issued as one issue and printed by Lessor & Call, printers, Dover-Foxcroft, Maine. The size was 6x9 inches. Nos. 5, 6 and 7 were printed by Ernest Biggs of Indiana. With No. 8, December 1923, Thomas Kelley began printing them for me. Tom brought out a real issue for me, size 8x5½ inches, 2 columns to the page, and a poem on Jack Harkaway was featured. In Vol. 2 No. 4, April 1924, I published my first poem, "Reckless Ralph, the Dime Novel King" and I thought I was something. I had quite a collection of old novels and story papers at that time, which I don't have now. In the May 1924 issue, Tom Kelley had a poem "Wanted A Prize Poem." He wanted to help me all he could so he offered a Zane Grey book for the best poem he could get. George Sahr of Kenosha, Wisconsin, wrote the first prize winner which appeared in the June issue. In addition to the poem, each issue contained ads for dime novels.

James C. Morris wrote "Memory of Days Gone By" that was a real bit of poetry. Then Bob Smeltzer came along with his "Boyhood Heroes." In

Vol. 2 No. 11, November 1924, my second poem was published, "Dime Novel Days in Massachusetts." At that time Albert E. Clark and myself went up into our attic where my folks used to keep old farm magazines, as well as newspapers, church and school papers, etc. We got to hunting through the old papers when Albert Clark came across a Buffalo Bill Stories and as he was a great lover of Buffalo Bill and had a long run of Buffalo Bill Stories and New Buffalo Bill Weekly, but he did not have the one he found, it was a prize. My turn came next, when I dug out No. 4 of Paul Jones Weekly. It was the first Paul Jones either one of us had ever seen, and we both read it in a hurry after we finished hunting. How these dime novels got up there or where they came from, no one knows, but as my folks had hired men from time to time, we think they must have bought them at a newsstand and brought them home to read. When they were finished with them, they had thrown them in with the other papers. The Paul Jones Weekly was in pretty poor condition, but I prized it for a good many years until I was able to get a set of 1 through 18 from Charles Austin of Philadelphia.

Albert Clark used to come to our old place, The River Side Farm on the old Providence road in Grafton. Albert was a little younger than I was, but he liked to read the old timers the same as I did. We were together quite a lot. He was well educated. He had attended Worcester Academy and was attending Brown University. While there he contacted some kind of disease, I never knew what it was, and died a terrible death. He went down to nothing before he died. His folks turned his collection of old novels over to me.

The Cummings & Clarks Flyer continued to feature poetry about dime novels and old dime novel days. Rob-

ert M. Rowan, James C. Morris, Geo. Sahr and Earl Farmer all were contributors. Other writers for the Flyer were Ralph F. Adimari, John Ferguson, and Pearl A. Knece. Pearl is a man, although Pearl sounds like a girl's name. But as it was the name given him he just had to take it. It is a good name just the same.

In October 1929 I brought out the Novel Hunters' Year Book Supplement with articles by Knece, Vernon Lemley, W. B. McCafferty and Bob Smeltzer and George Sahr. This supplement is very scarce today. Guess I didn't have too many printed. The Novel Hunters' Year Book started December 1926 and featured articles about dime novels much as the Dime Novel Roundup does. The last number was published in 1931. At that time I took over publication of the Happy Hours Magazine which after two months became the Dime Novel Roundup.

If my memory serves me correctly it was in 1920 that I first started collecting in order to accumulate a file of these novels, story papers and certain kinds of old books, magazines, etc. This fascinating hobby has been the means of bringing me many good friends, the most of whom of course I have never met. Of the 40 or so original correspondents there are only 7 left, Ralph Adimari, Ed Leithead, George Sahr, Ralph Smith, Robert Burns, P. J. Moran and Bob Frye.

END PART II

WANTED

Please quote all science-fiction or lost civilization type adventure in Street & Smith publications, F. T. Neeley in wrappers, Morrill and Higgins in wrappers, Seaside or Munro's Library, i.e. Haggard and Haggard parodies, etc. Special wants: The Stone Giant, Neeley 1898; The Devil's Gold, Morrill and Higgins 1892; The Hidden City, Cassell and Street & Smith (Columbia Library) and many, many others.

STUDART A. TEITLER

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Lakewood, Colo. 80215

EXCERPTS FROM LETTERS TO THE EDITORS

Dear Ed:

Moe Owens and I were talking about the possibility of putting some kind of a letter in an issue of the Round-up asking all the members who collect hard cover boys books or know of any collectors who do not subscribe to the Round-up but collect these books to send in their names and perhaps you could list them in some future issue. In that way we could contact more collectors for the purpose of buying, selling and trading.

Dwight E. Smith

Box 142

Fitchville, Conn. 06334

(Ed. Note. Let us hear from the hard bound boys book collectors and this information can be added to the listing of the membership each year. For that matter I will be glad to add a short descriptive phrase of any specialized collecting area.)

RECENTLY PUBLISHED ARTICLES CONCERNING DIME NOVELS

The Buffalo Courier-Express, Sunday, July 14, 1968. DIME NOVELS STARTED HERE, by Margaret Fess. A review of John C. Kunzog's article which appeared in the Dime Novel Round-up Nos. 415 and 416. The Round-up is mentioned but with the wrong address. There is a good picture of Mr. Kunzog accompanying the article.

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